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ABSTRACT

The act of reading is always interpretation through the lens of an individual's own culture and value system. In a World Literature class the encounter between American readers and a text from a different culture can produce 3 results: reading into it the individual's own world; translating the alien into the familiar; and appreciating its cultural differences. In a serious engagement in a cross cultural dialogue with authors and characters, students must learn both to let differences remain and how to open up their pre-judgments and thus themselves to serious challenge and unpredictable change. Like learning a foreign language, the student of World Literature essentially takes a leap of faith and enters a different world. Techniques which can help monocultural students achieve some empathy with another culture are: (1) free-writing and focused exercises; (2) acting out scenes from the text; (3) creative writing using characters, settings, etc. from texts; and (4) use of concrete language in describing emotions and experiences that seem all too familiar. When "Third World" texts are taught, the issue of authenticity of such cultures must be questioned--writing in the language of the colonizer itself poses questions. A sense of history should be enhanced in students--the pedagogy of auto-critique refuses to let individuals see themselves as the origin of meaning. Meanings are made by people situated in particular traditions, speaking particular languages, immersed in heritages of their own, and fastened to histories of and beyond time. (NKA)

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Resistance to the Domestication of Texts in the World Literature Class

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In his article that appeared in the first issue of College English of this year "'A Feminist Just Like Us?' Teaching Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter," John Champagne, a friend of mine, compares poorly taught world and multicultural lit courses to "the ethnic food fair." One of the dangers, he writes, is "treat the artifacts of 'foreign' cultures simply as commodities for Western consumption. A benevolent multiculturalism thus provides the alibi for an interested refusal to elaborate the ways in which such 'tasting' of global literatures is dependent upon, among other things, the history of imperialism" (22).

The food metaphor is appropriate considering that this session is made to unfairly compete with dinner. In my teaching experience, it is not easy to change the ethos of ethnic food fair in world lit classes. My suggestion to the problem of ethnic food fair is have the students pay more for their consumption in world lit classes. That's to say, we must make our students lose some of their arrogance, ease, and sense of superiority.

Readers of texts make their interpretations against a background of taken for granted pre-judgments. That means, the act of reading is always interpretation through the lens of one's own culture and value system. Although one's pre-judgments can never be

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fully erased, they can be challenged and modified.[1] In a World lit class the encounter between American readers and a text from a radically different culture can produce three results: (1) reading into it one's own world, (2) translating the alien into the familiar, and (3) appreciating its cultural difference as well as revising one's own pre-judgments. An ideal world lit class should be able to have many students achieve the last result.

"Empathy" is the word often used to describe the act of engagement with a foreign text. While achieving empathy is both difficult and important in the world lit class, the term does not entail the necessity of challenging "our" own cultural and value package to understand and respect "their" cultural practices. Sometimes, empathy involves the risk of producing reductionist readings of foreign texts, or domesticating the alien. In a serious engagement in a cross cultural dialogue with authors and characters, students must learn both to let differences remain and how to open up their pre-judgments and thus themselves to serious challenge and unpredictable change. This kind of cross-cultural dialogue can be traumatic as students' most cherished beliefs and values and even their own identities are challenged. But the result is growth. The pedagogy I am proposing to work together with that of empathy is that of auto-critique.

I. Empathy

Being a serious reader in the World lit class is much like

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[1] See Hans Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

learning a foreign language: the learner essentially takes a leap of faith and enters a different world. One problem then is how to empower students in a situation where the ultimate power must remain with the teacher; a second problem is what comprises knowledge in the literature classroom. A possible solution to both problems, it seems to me, is for the teacher to relinquish her interpretation, or, at least, to hold it more lightly. This approach will empower students to enter a different world willingly, with some of their pre-judgments temporarily suspended.

Four techniques are helpful in getting past the intransigence of some monocultural students so as to achieve a certain degree of empathy. First, start them off with a free-writing exercise as Peter Elbow describes in Writing without Teachers. In five minutes, the student must cover a sheet of paper with words by writing at top speed whatever comes into her head. This uncensored recording of random, fluid thoughts clears the mind as if one had briefly meditated. The next writing exercise is more focused. In another five-to-ten minute period, we can ask students to free-associate on the material they have read. For example, one might say "Imagine that you're the young girl, Tambu, in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions. What does your world at the homestead smell like? What does your world at the missionary school smell like? What are the predominant colors at homestead verses those at the missionary school? How does it feel to be called "African" in Africa by the whites? And how does it feel to be one of the six blacks in Sacred Heart?" The key to these exercises is to tap the uncritical part of

the psyche. Since it is the unconscious which is not set in its ways, it is a preferable site for promoting cross cultural understanding. Once the class has attained a more fluid "space" then discussion is likely to be more rewarding for everyone.

Second, have students act out a couple of scenes from the text or act out a short drama they have composed based on the setting and characters of the text. This exercise can charge the classroom atmosphere with a spirit of participation. Also, from time to time, call upon students who are not active participants to read passages from a book or a poem. The biggest challenge for achieving empathy is devising ways of reaching hostile students who, almost always much bigger than I, out of fear or apathy, hide in the back of the room and whisper among themselves.

Third, once or twice writing assignments can be creative writings. Ask them to write stories or poems utilizing the characters, the settings, and tensions between characters in a particular text. Share two pieces of good writing with the class in order to show that it is possible for readers to enter and appreciate a different world.

Fourth, as empathy is sometimes achieved at the expense of the differences - canceling out what we don't understand or seeing too much universality in human experiences - we need to push students for concrete language in describing emotions and experiences that seem all too familiar to us. Concepts like "freedom," "morality," "motherhood," "love," "happiness," "infidelity," "education," etc., need to be unpacked. For instance, when my students were reading

the Chinese writer Wang Anyi (The Lapse of Time), they commented on how little love there seemed to be in Chinese families. With some teeth-pulling on my part and discussion on the students' part, it became clear that the members of the Chinese family in the story "Between Themselves," express their love for one another in scolding words while giving up one's own share of goods of scarcity to another. I often give the example of the terrifying expression of maternal love in Toni Morrison's Beloved to point out the danger of homogenizing "love."

Although there is not much diversity in the student body in the World lit classroom at our university, still there is a need to take into consideration different readings and responses to the texts we teach. We can begin to nurture the appreciation for differences by taking seriously the differences in our students. Encourage minority students to speak up, share their reading journals (with their permission and names removed) with the rest of the class, and invite discussions on the journal entries. But we need to discourage questions directed at minority students as sources of cultural authenticity.

All the above ways of achieving empathy require students to think beyond their own worlds and cultures and to maintain the rich texture of the work they study. The instructor of the World lit class is required to discourage irresponsible, cliche, common sense, and dismissive responses from students and to pressure for concrete and evidential comments, however incoherent they may be at first. From my own experiences, incoherent responses often prove to

be signs of struggle and insight, and are potentials for good writings.

II. Auto-Critique

Empathy paves the way for reading foreign texts from within. When works of World literature are not approached from within their cultures, the reader is essentially taking anthropological, sociological, or other non-literary stances toward the material. Such a critical approach emphasizes the "ethnic" at the expense of the "literary." This means that we are still viewing foreign texts as windows to exotic cultures, an elitist attitude which trivializes the text, the culture, and the author. To study them as works of art will require the student to open her heart to emotions that are not pleasant by her standards and to open her mind to an aesthetic that is strange to her sensibility.[2] When such unhomely experience occurs, we should pause and make a big deal out of it. Rather than gliding over the signals of our estrangement from the text, rather than concentrating on what we can assimilate and explain, it may be useful to pause precisely there where our conventional habits of reading desert us. We need to look for the feature that defeats our ingrained habits; we need to be alert to that violation of our expectations and pause at it. In that very puzzlement may lie precisely the potential education the text can offer us.

Hans Georg Gadamer remarks in Philosophical Hermeneutics: "To

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[2] Attached to this report is a work-sheet for literary considerations for reading World literature.

understand a text is to come to understand oneself" (57). This wisdom convinces me of the necessity of teaching auto-critique in the World lit class. Auto-critique here does not mean to drag out one's own dirty laundry. It is rather a process of coming to understand what constitutes one's sense of self, what makes one's own mode of life and consciousness possible, and at what or whose expense one can hold on to this identity. To put it in a catchy phrase, it is all about understanding one's own subject position. Identification with universal ideas and be further confirmed of one's own values are the very things we need to resist.

The World lit classroom has the potential to become an alternative, resistant space within which we provoke our students to interrogate the categories and presuppositions they bring to their readings of texts and ideas from other worlds. In class discussions, we can try to help students articulate with concrete vocabularies those elements that raise problems to the Western eyes - to describe explicitly what is different and irritating, and to make a small inventory of our socio-economic, cultural, political, racial, gender classification and sexual existence which all estrange us from the characters and cultures in a foreign text. At least we can give an account of the assumptions, beliefs, and mental habits that make our reading difficult. In writing assignments we can let students choose a moment of difficulty in a text and elaborate on it in like fashion. Ask them to write on their experiences in their contact with a radically different sensibility and a radically different means of verbal expression

and on how they make sense of them.

When we teach texts from the so called "Third World," we must refuse to let students neatly separate the "First World" from the "Third World." We need to raise the issue of the trueness or authenticity of "Third World" cultures. Consider, for instance, that most "Third World" texts available in the West are written by writers from formerly colonized formations, who were educated in the West or in schools set up by the colonizers where, even to this day, the curriculum, and the values it inculcates, have undergone little change. Consider, too, that these texts are written in a metropolitan language -- primarily English. Consider, next, that a number of these works are by writers settled in the West -- Britain, U.S., France. Consider, finally, that the colonial encounters did happen, and that now a global capitalism saturates, although differently, the "Third World" as well. Suddenly, the myth of primal innocence, a pristine "Third World" untouched by, and in implacable opposition to the "West" and vice versa seems not only absurd but false as well. And yet this binary opposition has such a powerful hold on the minds of many of my students that it has become one of my persistent tasks to disabuse them of it, compel them again and again to interrogate the assumptions on which they proceed when they divide the world this way.

The contemporary "Third World" writer is indelibly marked by European or American civilization, even if he or she is in revolt against it, even if it constitutes a demonic system to be purged from the land and the mind. Postcolonialist writers have to wrestle

with that ambivalent heritage, and in many cases they are obliged to use the language of the colonizer if they want to reach a wide audience. This very compromise imposes further painful decisions: are they to adopt that language as though it were their own, as though they accepted the European heritage obediently, docilely, eagerly? Or should they try to introduce distortions, signal a linguistic protest, dramatize their compromise by reconstructing the language they are bound to feel has been imposed on them? Some postcolonial writers have chosen to "write back" -- write in their own national languages, such as Ngugi wa Thingo. If our students are introduced to the trajectory still rank of blood and theft through which English language has come to be a "universal" language, their sense of superiority might become weakened.

In reading the Indian writers Anita Desai and Mahasweta Devi, I raised some questions for discussions and reading journals: how writing in the language of the colonizer (English) itself poses some problems; how this language can be used against itself; how the writers use the language creatively to highlight the damages the colonizing forces have inflicted upon India. For instance, the English words travel in the bodies of Devi's Bengali stories like viruses besieging, violating, and infecting with terror the health of the Bengali world. ("Draupadi")

Sometimes, the problem is not the separation of the "First World" from the "Third World"; rather it is the habit of understanding the "Third World" as a "pupil" of the "First World." While reading both Desai and Devi, my students saw evidence of

women's struggle for freedom. Thus they concluded that colonialism was not all bad. Leaving aside the question whether or not colonialism was all bad, I chose to draw their attention to the problem fundamental to the project of reading across cultures when the culture being decoded is seen as unequal to one's own. Their assumption was that any effort at female independence and emancipation from patriarchal structures is itself a Western project and feminism is a Western institution. Desai's Fire on the Mountain portrays colonial mimicry in the character Ila Das, whose modern occupation, social work, aiming at saving women from their barbaric customs, not only denies her of physical well being but also robs her of any faith in her own culture and religion. On one hand she realizes "how helpless our upbringing made us . . . We thought we were being equipped with the very best -- French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses -- my, all that only to find it left us helpless, positively handicapped " (127). The effect of helplessness is that these women are fit for nothing else other than regurgitating Western notions of femininity and freedom, and the consequence is that Ila Das often goes to bed without dinner. On the other hand, she despises what is Indian - "to see these poor, ignorant people grovel in the dust before their wretched little oil-smeared, tinsel-decked idols, gives me a turn. . . . And that oily, oily priest-man we have slinking about our village -- I can tell he's up to no good. I hate him" (128), and eventually she gets murdered by the father whose daughter she is trying to save from marrying an older man. The life and death of

Ila Das set into relief the tragedy of western educated christian women in India who in rescuing "the native" women from their brutal husbands and religion become themselves brutalized and violated by Western ideologies and practice. It is through this kind of reading and discussion that we came to realize our habit of seeing and reading which are deeply rooted in the colonial project of enlightening the "savages."

Another means to foster auto-critique is to enhance a sense of history in students. Most students are reluctant to view themselves as products of history. Often we hear remarks like: Colonialism happened in the past, way before my time. I am not responsible for what my ancestors did. Trying to make them feel guilty can only result in unproductive antagonist confrontation. It seems that the best and less threatening way to enhance a sense of historical importance in the making of an individual is to draw from the lives of the characters to see to what extent their lives and attitudes are shaped by the history that is beyond their times.

One semester, I used Nadine Gordimer's July's People to begin my World lit class. In one session, I led the discussion to the reasons that the major protagonist, Maureen, becomes very angry with herself and her world near the end of the novel. As an upper middle class white housewife in then apartheid South Africa, Maureen has thought little about the history shaping her life and self identity. She has often felt a moral superiority in her liberal view of the race conflict and generous treatment of her black servants. But when her family, in escape from the black

revolution in the capital city, seeks refuge in their black servant's, July's village, she is forced to confront the village's desolate landscape, under-nourished children, primitive shelters, and her own filth and odors. Maureen gradually realizes what has made her life and self-understanding possible in her big white house in one of the good neighborhoods of Johannesburg. It is the history of European colonization with its looting, plundering, abusing of the native wealth and labor that made African blacks who they are and African whites who they are. Personally it is her father's money and social status made from a gold mine in South Africa that are responsible for who she is. She attempts to run away at the end of the novel not from the July's village, not from the increasingly estranged husband and children, but rather from herself, the self that she thought she had chosen to be. In Maureen's case, it was not too difficult for the students to see the indelible marks of history of colonialism on her body and in her psyche.

The pedagogy of auto-critique refuses to let us see ourselves as the origin of meaning. Its objective is enhancing in us an awareness that we make meanings as people situated in particular traditions, speaking particular languages, emersed in heritages of our own, and fastened to histories of and beyond our time. The pedagogy of auto-critique also refuses to let us imagine other peoples and cultures as worlds where everything is possible. It tries to make us question what governs our imagination about other cultures, such as stereotypes, images, beliefs, folk tales, TV

shows, Hollywood pictures, etc. which have transformed our ignorance into prejudice.